

# Fostering Lifelong Spellers Through Meaningful Experiences

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Move away from the Friday spelling test by involving students more directly in instruction, and watch spelling ability improve.

**M**any elementary teachers and parents view spelling proficiency as a cornerstone of academic success because it links to advances in general literacy (e.g., Juel, 1988; Stanovich, 1986). Although educators have different goals for spelling instruction, most agree that spelling words with accuracy and ease is crucial (Dorn & Soffos, 2001; Tankersley, 2003). Unfortunately, the “Friday spelling test” as the major benchmark for spelling seems all too prevalent in classrooms today (DuBois, Erickson, & Jacobs, 2007). This creates frustration and reduces motivation for students who struggle with spelling and general literacy. It also fails to take advantage of what we know about effective spelling instruction.

Some U.S. educators believe that spelling is the most poorly taught subject and requires more direct instruction (Darch, Eaves, Crowe, Simmons, & Conniff, 2006). Others suggest that inconsistency of spelling instruction is of national concern (DuBois et al., 2007; Gentry, 1987, 2004).

Children’s success or failure with spelling is strongly linked to their academic motivation. Elementary “low spellers” have more anxiety and increased avoidance motivation related to daily spelling instruction (Sideridis, 2005). We have noticed this avoidance and sense of defeat both with our own children and with many children in elementary schools where we have worked.

Gary’s (first author) son was regularly bringing home Friday spelling tests with scores of 30, 40, 60,

and similar when in the first grade. His response was to avoid any spelling work, and he often cried when it was time to practice spelling. A conference with his teacher revealed little connection between the spelling word list and other literacy areas. During the beginning of his second-grade year, he again began to bring home failing spelling grades until a conference with the teacher led to accommodations. Although he currently makes better grades in spelling, he clearly sees spelling as a rote exercise with no real connection to learning words for a purpose.

Experiences such as these transform the weekly spelling tests to an albatross, leading to feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and poor motivation. The emphasis on competing to make a perfect score each week can devastate the self-esteem of the emerging reader.

Careful instructional practices are the key to building the student’s motivation and confidence in spelling. Children are far more likely to value the need to spell throughout their lives if they are motivated by positive rather than negative considerations. Recently we examined some of the research on motivation in education for clues to techniques that could be helpful with spelling. One approach, achievement goal theory, provides a valuable framework and insights that can promote stronger positive attitudes and increased motivation.

## Achievement Goal Theory

Achievement goal theory addresses the reasons students make an effort to succeed in academic activities (Guay, Marsh, & Boivin, 2003; Stevenson & Newman, 1986). The research has focused on two orientations held by students: grade (or performance) orientation and learning (or mastery) orientation.

Students who are concerned with appearing competent and doing better than others hold a grade (or performance) orientation. They might appraise their progress by asking, “Did I get an ‘A’ or a 100 on my spelling test?” or “Does my teacher think I’m smart?” or “Did I do as well as other students?” Students with a grade orientation usually focus on getting a positive evaluation from the teacher and enjoy competing with others, if they have high ability. But a grade orientation doesn’t reward students who are toward the middle or bottom of the performance continuum. These students give up more easily and label themselves as “dumb” or not as smart as everyone else. They gradually get discouraged and disengage. Yet even though the grade orientation can harm so many, it continues to be dominant in most classrooms, especially in spelling.

In contrast, students who are more interested in developing their skills and who tend to use more internal standards to evaluate themselves (rather than comparing themselves to others) hold a learning (or mastery) orientation. Their typical questions might be, “How many new words have I learned this week?” or “Did I do better this week than last?” or “What are the hardest words I was able to spell?” These students focus on their own learning and improvement over time and less on other people’s judgments. In addition, many other positive student behaviors accompany a learning orientation (Urdu & Schoenfelder, 2006). Psychologists stress that this orientation, though all too rare in classrooms, increases student motivation. Students persist longer with difficult tasks, they are more willing to try challenging tasks, and—perhaps most relevant for fostering a lifelong love of literacy—they have more positive attitudes toward the subject matter.

Because U.S. culture is competition-oriented and the grade orientation is pervasive in classrooms and beyond, students need strong encouragement to develop a learning orientation. This is especially true for students who do not have strong skills in literacy. Fortunately, we have found that teachers can play a large role in helping their students become more learning-oriented. They can structure activities and

## PAUSE AND PONDER

- Does the traditional “Friday spelling test” meet the goals of teaching spelling and the overall goal of good literacy instruction?
- How does a young child’s success or failure with spelling affect their academic motivation?
- How can teachers structure spelling instruction and assessment so that they are consistent with good literacy instruction?

assessment to foster helpful attitudes and beliefs. They can reward effort toward mastery and the joy of learning rather than focusing solely on spelling test grades and competition with others. Research suggests that students who perceive their teachers emphasizing learning goals tend to have more positive attitudes toward school and subject matter (Wilson & Trainin, 2007).

Ames (1992) summarized the research on specific actions that teachers can take to structure their classrooms to promote learning goals among students. She suggested three key classroom elements that research has shown to be effective in promoting learning goals among students: (1) meaningful

and challenging tasks, (2) evaluation and recognition strategies that are private and stress student effort over ability, and (3) student participation in decision making.

This work is particularly worth highlighting given recent concerns about pervasive problems with spelling instruction (DuBois et al., 2007). Ames suggested a number of instructional and assessment strategies for the young student that can be used to foster more positive attitudes toward spelling and literacy in general. In the following sections, each of Ames’s elements is described in the context of specific suggestions for spelling.

## Meaningful and Challenging Tasks

Students develop different motivational orientations as a function of the kinds of tasks teachers employ in their classrooms. Meaningful tasks that incorporate variety and student interests are more likely to promote learning goals and higher motivation (Ames, 1992). This makes implicit sense—practicing a list of words over and over, trying to perfect them, can diminish motivation. Spelling must be improved, but if mechanical details are the only focus, the joy and creativity and emotional impact of words can be lost. If spelling activities have variety and show the “fun” aspect of words and how to use them, motivation can

be sparked, allowing learning goals to surface and thrive. Table 1 illustrates several strategies related to meaningful and challenging tasks.

First, students should learn spelling through meaningful writing experiences (DuBois et al., 2007). Using spelling words to write messages to others, make lists, develop plans, make signs, write letters to friends and family, make greeting cards, and write songs and poems helps children make meaning through writing. Teaching spelling words in isolation takes away their relevance for students and reduces their motivation for wanting to learn. If children can see the value of communicating with their spelling words in everyday life, they will want to learn for mastery—and not just to get a perfect score on a test on one day. Many studies have demonstrated that interest has a powerful influence on learning (Hidi & Renninger, 2006).

Second, multisensory techniques are a sure way to engage children because they can have visual, auditory, and kinesthetic involvement with each word. Instead of just writing a word over and over or writing it in a sentence, drawing a picture that represents a word and using colored markers and pens to write it in creative ways (e.g., using different colors for patterns, chunks, or blends) promotes learning (Golon, 2004). Emphasis on visualizing a word is important because research has shown that people are better able to remember visual images (Bohlin, Durwin, & Reese-Weber, 2009). Websites such as SpellingCity.com allow students to enter their individualized spelling words and play matching games, hang mouse, word scrabble, word search, missing letter, and crossword puzzles. These allow students to compete against themselves rather than against their classmates, a key factor in promoting a learning orientation.

Third, teaching spelling explicitly so that children understand the logic to spelling is critical (Dvorak, Ingersol, Kastle, Mullins, & Rafter, 1999; Gentry, 2004; Peha, 2003). When students understand the value and purpose of specific learning tasks, their motivation increases (Sideridis, 2005). Personalizing spelling words for each child based on words they use frequently similarly enhances mastery motivation. Creating spelling lists tied to students' writing needs and teaching words based on meaning, spelling patterns, and common words is helpful (Peha, 2003). When the words are known and useful, children will not be overwhelmed, as they can be when

**Table 1**  
**Varied, Meaningful, Challenging Tasks That Promote Mastery Goals for Spelling**

- Encourage students to use spelling words in real-world writing.
- Use multisensory techniques to make connections with each word.
- Have students create images to represent words.
- Use interactive websites that allow students to compete against themselves.
- Personalize spelling words for each child.
- Teach high-frequency words that students see in school and at home.
- Teach word sorts.

confronted with an arbitrary list of unfamiliar words without a context. Teaching the most frequently used words that students see in reading and writing as well as high-frequency words and words related to activities they have recently participated in at school or home are the best focus (Dvorak et al., 1999). If students can master 850–1000 words during their elementary years, they have 89% of words they will use in writing (DuBois et al., 2007).

Explicit strategies for learning to spell also help students develop a learning orientation. Self-reflection and self-correction are important strategies to teach so that children can learn to internalize standards and rely on themselves rather than the teacher. A well-researched approach based on developmental issues in acquiring spelling is the spelling instruction approach recommended in *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008). This book provides a systematic approach to word study with an emphasis on understanding spelling errors.

*Words Their Way* provides the teacher with an explicit, step-by-step method to provide word instruction. The foundation for this approach involves the concept of word sorting. The authors find that having students categorize pictures, sounds, or words enhances their understanding of word features. Through this process, they construct their own word knowledge to apply to spelling. Although the specifics are too extensive for this article, *Words Their Way* highlights five major concepts important to the teaching of spelling:

1. Word sorts are interesting and fun because they involve hands-on and manipulative activities.
2. Students use words, sounds, and pictures that they already know so they can concentrate on analyzing patterns.
3. Rather than relying on rote memorization, this approach emphasizes similarities and differences in words.
4. Sorts allow students to study many more words in a much shorter time than traditional memorization.
5. The use of word sorts allows teachers greater ease of differentiation among students with various learning needs.

Finally, *Words Their Way* promotes three types of word sorts to learn spelling: sound sorts (e.g., sorting by rhyme, number of syllables), pattern sorts (e.g., sorting by word families, rimes, vowel and consonant sounds), and meaning sorts (e.g., sorting by homophone, roots, stems, and affixes).

## Evaluation and Recognition

One of the most noticeable means of influencing students' goal orientation is the method by which students are evaluated and recognized (Green & Johnson, 2010; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Many classrooms are focused on summative evaluation and final products. When students feel that they are only successful when they get the perfect score on a once-a-week spelling test, they feel defeated and less capable than others around them. Several helpful classroom strategies related to evaluation and

recognition tied to spelling instruction are displayed in Table 2.

The first factor related to evaluation that can enhance learning goals is to reduce overt competition (Ames, 1992). Emphasizing the individual's progress across time is more likely to encourage learning goals. It is also less likely to lead to discouragement than an exclusive diet of constant competition with others, sometimes inadvertently conveyed by posting all the "100s" or recognizing the best speller of the week.

Instead, teachers can deemphasize specific grades by recognizing students who use good spelling in their daily written work. They can also help students set an individual goal for spelling success. For example, children may keep a chart where they give themselves credit for good spelling in their daily written work, for improving their spelling grade from week to week, for getting more letter-sequencing right in their spelling (instead of f-y-l-n-i-g for *flying*, they produce f-l-i-n-g), or for starting with the right beginning sound and ending sound more often. By collecting a "portfolio" of their spelling skills across contexts rather than a set of perfect scores on tests, they will move toward valuing their effort and what they have learned rather than their innate ability and how they compare with peers.

A substantial body of literature illustrates the effective use portfolios to improve instruction, sense of success, and motivation in literacy (Hansen, 1992; Paratore & McCormack, 2007). Portfolios can include items such as pre-attitudes about spelling, observations of your own spelling patterns, weekly spelling self-tests, daily logs, teacher and student reflections, lists of words accomplished, and students' feelings about the spelling words and tests. They will learn that success is tied to their improvement and how much they learn, not to "winning" or being the "best."

A key element for reducing competition is keeping evaluation private rather than public (Schunk et al., 2008). The individual portfolios described above can be assembled and evaluated privately. Similarly, some teachers have students privately record their skills at the beginning and at the end of a grading period. Then the student and teacher both evaluate the change in skills. This procedure helps individuals focus on their own gains over time rather than on how they perform against peers.

Another strategy to expand evaluation and recognition beyond grades involves consideration of



factors other than skill level when recognizing students or rewarding them. For example, allowing older students to help younger students with their spelling once a week or once a month would earn them recognition as an “Exceptional Speller Helper.” Third-grade students who aren’t necessarily at the top of their class may have a chance to help first-grade students with words that they have already mastered (Ritter, Barnett, Denny, & Albin, 2009).

A strategy to enhance learning goals and engender lifelong enjoyment of spelling is to teach students to evaluate their own work so that they feel some sense of control of the evaluation process. For example, students can correct their own errors immediately after a spelling test, circling words they may have misspelled in their writing (editing words that don’t “look” right), and using error-correction procedures when practicing spelling words (Gerber, 1986). In one procedure, students detect and self-correct spelling errors by first comparing their word to a model. If the word is right, then they are taught to use self-reinforcement (e.g., “Good for me!”). If the word is wrong, then the student goes through the following three steps:

1. The incorrect letter(s) of the word should be crossed out, circled, or boxed.
2. The correct letter(s) should be written in above the incorrect one(s).
3. A correct spelling should be written again on the line next to the incorrect version.

## Student Participation in Decision Making

The last aspect of classroom structure suggested by Ames (1992) is student participation in decision making. Giving students opportunities to develop independence and responsibility for their learning rather than keeping all authority in the hands of the teacher promotes a learning orientation and higher levels of engagement. If students are primarily responding to the teacher, waiting and watching for cues as to how to interact within an activity, then some sense of self-control is missing.

Interaction that involves some responsibility for classroom decisions draws students in to identify more readily with goals and aids them in developing their own sensibilities, which can serve them into

**Table 2**  
**Evaluation and Recognition Practices That Promote Mastery Goals for Spelling**

- Recognize students who use good spelling in their daily written work.
- Help students set an individual goal for spelling success.
- Have students collect a “portfolio” of their spelling skills across contexts.
- Have students privately record their skills at the beginning and at the end of a grading period.
- Allow older students who aren’t necessarily at the top of their class to help younger students with their spelling.
- Have students correct their own errors.

**Table 3**  
**Student Participation in Decision-Making Practices That Promote Mastery Goals for Spelling**

- Allow students to make decisions related to spelling instruction.
- Allow students to occasionally decide how they are going to be evaluated.
- Allow students to create a personal word wall.

adulthood. Strategies related to student participation in decision making are shown in Table 3.

Examples at the elementary level could include allowing students to make decisions related to questions such as “What words will be on the spelling list this week?” or “How are we going to practice learning these words this week?” Students can then spend time discussing, perhaps concluding that writing the words in alphabetic order was done the last two weeks, so this week they want to draw pictures of the words and write the words beside the pictures. The students may also decide how they are going to be evaluated from time to time. Instead of the traditional calling out of the spelling words, they may choose to write all the words they can remember and then exchange papers to have other students write words they forgot.

Students may also personalize their spelling test. For example, they may note the words that they misspelled or failed to read correctly during other

activities and choose those words to put on a private word wall. Those words could become all or part of their spelling list for each week.

## Developing Positive Attitudes Toward Spelling

We believe that teachers can foster greater feelings of success and increase students' desire to spell correctly by orienting instructional practices around these three classroom elements: (1) varied and meaningful yet challenging tasks, (2) new evaluation and recognition practices, and (3) student participation in decision making. Evaluation and recognition practices that decrease emphasis on competition and emphasize effort and enjoyment will broaden students' positive experiences with spelling during their school years, even for those who are not the strongest performers. Allowing students to participate in decision making related to spelling words and tasks helps them to develop their own personal sense of success and to see their own literacy strengths. As an example, students should be able to incorporate real-world and high-frequency words that they use often in conversation with family or friends as part of their work on spelling.

Students' perceptions of their skills influence the types of activities that they select, how much they challenge themselves, and the persistence they demonstrate when involved in literacy activities such as spelling. Students with positive attitudes are more motivated in class and more likely to value reading and spelling over a lifetime.

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## Take ACTION!

When teaching and assessing spelling, it is important that teachers use approaches that help students have an internal orientation toward spelling. Students should evaluate themselves based on their own standards rather than comparing themselves to others.

**1.** Make sure that students are given spelling tasks that are meaningful and challenging by

using a variety of methods that uses words that are relevant, personal, and presented in multisensory forms. Also, teach students word components and patterns and let them use computer programs for practice.

**2.** Evaluate students using nontraditional methods such as setting individual goals that show change in ability rather than grades that are for absolute right and

wrong spelling, use portfolios, keep private records of their progress, and let students self-correct.

**3.** Let students participate in making decisions about what words they are going to learn and how they are going to learn them. Also, allow students to participate in decisions about how they are going to be graded, and let them develop their own personal set of words that they want to learn to spell.

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## MORE TO EXPLORE

### ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plans

- "Sort, Hunt, Write: A Weekly Spelling Program" by Leigh Hall
- "Spelling Cheerleading: Integrating Movement and Spelling Generalizations" by Sarah Dennis-Shaw

### IRA Journal Articles

- "What Can Children's Spelling of *Running* and *Jumped* Tell Us About Their Need for Spelling Instruction?" by Laura Boynton Hauerwas and Joanne Walker, *The Reading Teacher*, October 2004
- "Questions Teachers Ask About Spelling" by Shane Templeton and Darrell Morris, *Reading Research Quarterly*, January/February/March 1999

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